

As researchers debate ideas of how to create an academic impact in preparation for the REF, **Dr Peter Wells** ([http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/blog-contributors/#Peter\\_Wells](http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/blog-contributors/#Peter_Wells)) looks at the impact that the REF stands to have on academics, their morale and the ways in which they work.



The main avowed purpose of the Research Excellence Framework (REF) is as a mechanism to inform the distribution of government funds to universities such that those institutions performing the best research will receive the most funding. As such, it is a flawed mechanism as I have argued elsewhere ([http://www.brass.cf.ac.uk/uploads/Research\\_Excellence\\_Framework290410.pdf](http://www.brass.cf.ac.uk/uploads/Research_Excellence_Framework290410.pdf)). However, scant consideration has been given to the impact of the REF on academics: their morale; their valuation of their work; and even the ways in which they work.

Inevitably, a mechanism like the REF creates a set of intended and unintended rules, which then come to guide and ultimately dominate behaviours – often with unanticipated consequences. In significant ways, the REF undermines traditional core academic values to the extent that it threatens to destroy the basis of that which it seeks to measure. Most important of all, the REF threatens academic freedom.

### **Research Collaboration**

Consider the issue of research collaboration with colleagues. The purpose of constructing research teams and centres of excellence is to generate synergies between the constituent members, thereby accelerating the rate and broadening the scope of scientific progress. Academics should be free to choose with whom they work. Yet under the REF guidelines, only one author within an institutional unit is able to take credit for a given paper. So the logical response is to collaborate only with authors outside the institutional unit of assessment, and thereby the freedom to choose with whom one collaborates is undermined. In extreme cases colleagues might even become rivals, fighting for the right to have their name used in the REF against a specific publication. Alternatively, some individuals may have too many suitable publications but the institutional unit cannot count the extra ones because they have not been co-authored by others in the same institutional unit. This state of affairs is hardly a recipe for institutional harmony or loyalty.

Of course it might be the case that the implicit benefit in collaborating with external colleagues (i.e. those outside the institutional unit) might be considered a valuable by-product of the REF mechanism. Developing such links across different universities is part of the process whereby academic communities of interest are created after all. While this may be so, it should not be forgotten that external collaboration is weighted in favour of working with those in the same core discipline. This is because the high-ranking journals that are the cornerstone of the REF mechanism tend as a rule to be long-established and in the heart of the discipline concerned. This is all well and good when the research continues to advance the core discipline.

### **Curtailing interdisciplinary ventures**

Unfortunately, much of the interesting and challenging work, as well as much of the socially vital work, tends to occur at the boundaries of disciplines, or where disciplines combine – precisely the intellectual spaces occupied by newer, lower-ranked journals. One of the intellectual freedoms being curtailed by the REF mechanism is therefore the right to escape some of the constraints of existing disciplines. Academics should be free to choose the subject of their work.

### **Separation of research and teaching**

Alternatively, consider the issue of deciding on where talents may best be deployed and which academic activities are valued. A contemporary university requires a broad array of talented individuals be they in teaching, administration, admissions, theorisation, client research, writing and so forth. Academics should be free to contribute in those areas that they are most suited to. Yet under the REF some are clearly more equal than others in terms of status and value. There is an embedded tautology here that has not been

sufficiently exposed. For decades senior management at universities have argued that research-led teaching is the key to high quality undergraduate and graduate programmes. Yet as schools and departments across the UK university sector seek to manipulate their staff numbers to maximum REF advantage, and in the process declare some staff as teaching-only, so there is an ongoing separation of the two activities.

The most research-active staff may end up buying out their teaching altogether, so formalising this separation. Those that are research active might be given additional School or University funding to further their work, and so accentuate the growing divide between those deemed active and those deemed inactive. If the research active staff then have better career and promotion prospects, both within the institution concerned and outside it, then it starts to undermine the commonality of interest that is vital to a well-functioning department. Universities may pay lip service to the value of many other functions beyond research, but as the next REF approaches it is already evident that Universities are active in the academic transfer window, using whatever reserves and resources are available, to buy in high-flying, globally-networked and above all well-published senior staff in a frantic effort to boost the REF result obtained.

### **An end to the academic ideal**

The erosion of these key intellectual freedoms by the REF mechanism could easily result in the dismantling of the academic ideal with its emphasis on the purity of intellectual debate, on the peer review process, and on a sense of community that transcends narrow parochial concerns. Take the example of reviewing articles for journals. The process depends upon dispassionate analysis from neutral individuals offering their considered view. But why should individuals do this if it helps another, rival institution obtain a higher REF score? Why should individuals undertake any activity that gets in the way of their direct achievement of a portfolio of publications of sufficient status to merit inclusion in the REF? Being an external PhD examiner for a derisory fee becomes an exercise in calculation of anticipated self-benefit. More profoundly, staff may lose sight of the purpose of research itself (i.e. as a means to understand the world better) and instead become obsessed only by the need to appear in a certain population of journals. Publication becomes the primary end, not knowledge creation or intrinsic interest in the subject.

### **Eroding staff morale**

Unsurprisingly, all of these developments and uncertainties have a deleterious impact on staff morale. Certainly there are some individuals who have the right profile and interests that have benefitted, but take as a whole the entire mechanism is deeply disturbing for staff. Not least, there has been significant uncertainty over what each round of the REF will constitute, and how each institution will respond. The result is that many academics do not know whether they will attain the magical 'research active' status until just prior to the actual submission itself – a decision that could have huge implications for their careers and future prospects.

It is a highly stressful process that ends with each REF round, only to start again immediately with the next. Will the rules change? Will the journals that I have published in be downgraded? How will 'impact' be defined? Will my work count as a case-study? The painfully slow publication process only accentuates the agony, with authors waiting months only to find work rejected. As academic freedom is eroded, as stress levels grow, and as public sector pay continues to be curtailed, it is inevitable that graduates emerging with debt will find academic careers increasingly unattractive, and over the long term the REF mechanism will quietly strangle the life out of the vibrant academic community it is supposedly trying to create. With the REF the concept of 'expertise' is already past. It used to be the case that one of the benefits of having Universities was that they became repositories of experienced, knowledgeable individuals whose expertise carried many social benefits. The REF mechanism encourages a narrow pragmatism; the only expertise is that involved in getting published.

### **The need to build from academics upwards**

The inevitable question arises as to what should be used to replace the REF. Experience with the REF itself suggests that a good starting point would be to establish some basic principles of equity, diversity,

tolerance and inclusion. The purpose should build from the academic community upwards, and hence seek to create a mechanism whereby academics are empowered to undertake innovative, challenging and useful research. For example, everybody should be included, as should all activities. It is partly by virtue of the 'teaching' staff undertaking a higher teaching load that the research active staff can achieve their publications results; without academic admissions tutors working long hours to process student applications there would be nobody to receive research-led teaching, and insufficient funds to support the University. Without some academics doing applied research for clients there would be questions over the social validity of Universities. So, including all staff is crucial. Equally, all outputs should be included to give a fair reflection of the totality of publications and other forms of output that Universities nowadays create, and to capture the vitality of expanding research horizons beyond the traditional disciplines. ESRC research centres already have to report back a large number of 'key performance indicators' across a wide range of activities. No one individual can possibly achieve a high score in all areas, but the unit as a whole certainly can. This is eminently sensible, for it allows talents to be used in the most suitable application to achieve the best possible output for the group as a whole.

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